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CHAPTER 10

Why Did the Seamen Have to Die?

The *Kursk* Tragedy and the Evoking of Old Testament Blood Sacrifice

Elina Kahla

Abstract

This chapter addresses church–state collaboration in the context of 'spiritual national defence'; it compares different views represented in cultural productions on the tragedy of the submarine *Kursk*, which sank in the Barents Sea on 12 August 2000. It suggests that the Russian secular leadership's reluctance to deal with the management of the past, especially concerning the punishment of Stalinist oppressors, is compensated by glorifying victims – here, the seamen of the *Kursk* – having died on duty, as martyrs. The glorification of martyrs derives from Old Testament theology of blood sacrifice (2 Moses 24:8) and makes it possible to commemorate Muslim martyrs together with Orthodox Christian ones. Some theologians have claimed that Russia had needed these sacrifices to spiritually wake up in the post-atheist vacuum

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of values, and that the Russian people had to repent for having abandoned their forefathers' Christian faith. In this line of apologetics of blood sacrifices and need to repent, the New Testament's promise of Jesus' complete purgation and redemption of sin through perfect sacrifice (Matt. 26:28) is not mentioned. My reading elaborates on the commemorative album *Everlasting Lamp of Kursk* by (then) Hegumen Mitrofan (Badanin) (2010), as well as on the drama film *Kursk* by Danish director Thomas Vinterberg, whose film illustrates pan-European visions, based implicitly on the New Testament promise.

Keywords: submarine *Kursk*; cultural production; dying on duty; blood sacrifice; martyrdom; Old Testament, New Testament

Introduction

The geostrategic importance of the Kola Peninsula is compounded by the presence of both the complex of the Northern Fleet (NF) units and servicing industries and the elites of the Russian federal nuclear science. The high gain–high risk military industry makes the news from time to time. In August 2019, the testing of a nuclear-powered cruise missile SSC-X-9 Skyfall (in Russian: Burevestnik) led to an explosion, killing five scientific specialists and two military officials and to a brief spike in radiation levels in Severodvinsk. The federal administration, as usual, praised the victims as national heroes; meanwhile, anxious residents stocked up on iodine (Novaâ gazeta, 2019; Reuters, 2019). A month before, 14 sailors had died in a fire aboard a nuclear-powered submarine in the Barents Sea. Initially, officials refused to comment on the accident, but a top naval official later said that the men had given their lives preventing a 'planetary catastrophe' (Time, 2019).

News of the submarine fire echoed the worst post-Soviet naval disaster, the sinking of the Oscar II multi-purpose missile attack submarine K-141, the *Kursk*, on 12 August 2000 in the Barents Sea, killing the entire crew of 118. The disaster raised unprecedented attention both in Russia and worldwide, ultimately leading to reforms in the Russian navy. It also signposted the new

start of collaborations between the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), reviving tsardom traditions. This collaboration gradually normalized and came to be characterized by the term 'spiritual national defence' (Pravoslavnaâ narodnaâ gazeta, 2016; Unian, 2019). In wider society, these developments coincided with growing anti-Western sentiments and a conservative turn (Voices from Russia, 2010). This chapter examines the apologetics of dying on duty, a theme that actualized in the aftermath of the *Kursk* disaster and inspired authors of cultural productions. This reading of several cultural productions explored how heroes who died on duty are commemorated – from a theological-doctrinal perspective as well as in the frame of memory politics. Specifically, the chapter is about interpreting war as a time of divine punishment and human redemption, based mostly on Old Testament prophesies like that of Elijah (Bianchi, 2010, pp. 26–35; Pravoslavie.Ru, 2015; Zobern, 2014). My thesis is that, in Russian cultural productions on the tragedy of *Kursk*, Old Testament blood sacrifice overrules Jesus' singular sacrifice of the New Testament, a theme that underlies 'pan-European' or pan-Christian cultural productions on the same topic.

Dying on Duty as an Act of National Redemption

In the closed community of the Vidyaevo Naval Base, rumours about the fate of the *Kursk* spread quickly by word of mouth and soon seeped out to then-independent media (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2019).[1] Video clips revealed the rage of NF officers and their families in an unprecedented way. These people were patriotic defenders of the Motherland, long frustrated with humiliatingly poor living conditions, unpaid salaries and a corrupt military bureaucracy. Meeting them face to face in Vidyaevo was the first PR test for the newly elected President Vladimir Putin, an unprecedented move that provoked deep-seated feelings. Pondering over the disaster as an act of national redemption 10 years on, Mitrofan, the former NF naval officer, later hegumen and metropolitan, wrote, 'Why did we need the tragedy of Kursk? What sins were washed over these days by streams of tears that

millions of Russians shed at television screens?' (Mitrofan, 2010, p. 72). In Mitrofan's apologetic writing, from an insider's theological-apocalyptical viewpoint, Russia had needed the sacrifices to be spiritually woken up. The lost lives served as acts to redeem sins by blood sacrifice, following the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament (2 Moses 24:8). In his writing, the New Testament's promise of Jesus' complete purgation and redemption of sin through perfect sacrifice (Matt. 26:28) is not discussed.

I argue that referring here to an Old Testament apocalyptic purge complies implicitly with the high Stalinist practice of political cleansing; at the very least, the decision to employ such a religious reference has the effect of obfuscating the otherwise conspicuous lack of publicly organized secular memory politics in a state with a prominent totalitarian past (i.e. a history of repression). Instead of secular mechanisms being allowed to process history, church–state and church–military collaborate to do so, emulating tsar-time models. The clergy thus frame dying on duty as blood sacrifices, appealing to citizens to carry out redemption practices without holding the secular leadership accountable for its errors or crimes. This simulates the practice of the past, while tsars as sovereigns anointed by God were not supposed to repent to anyone but God. Rather, as practices at the Solovetsk Islands and other memorial sites demonstrate, the clergy pray for the dead souls without even addressing the issue of culpability. 'There are two memories competing there', wrote Arsenij B. Roginskij, chairman of the Memorial organization, founded in 1989 to examine Stalin-era crimes. 'Our memory is looking for who is guilty, and the church is not. The state feels safe passing this memory to the church' (The New York Times, 2015).

However, alongside the Russian civil and military officialdom and wider public, one would point to a third perspective: the non-Russian, represented here via cultural productions, which can be understood as effective vehicles of soft power. In 2018, the Danish film director Thomas Vinterberg released a catastrophe genre fictional film based on broadcast journalist Robert Moore's bestseller *A Time to Die: The Untold Story of the Kursk Disaster* (2002). Vinterberg explores interestingly the same question of the

apologetics of death on duty as Mitrofan but from an outsider's/non-Russian, transnational ('Central European') premise. In this analysis, I explore what aspects of apologetics of dying on duty Russian vs. non-Russian productions highlight, discussing their commonalities and emphasizing their contrasts. Do these cultural productions add something new to our understanding of national models for dying on duty, or of underlying idiosyncrasies like church–state symphony, and coping with them in their world of escalating mutual dependencies?

Everlasting Lamp of the Kursk

The illustrated album *Everlasting Lamp of the Kursk*, dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the events of 12 August 2000, was published in 2010 to commemorate the victims and explore the theological-mystical meaning of the disaster. The author, Mitrofan (Badanin), is an influential actor in the region and a prolific writer; since March 2019, he has been metropolitan of the Murmansk and Monchegorsk diocese. His oeuvre deals with theological, historical and (auto)biographical topics. He had a long career in the NF, but, due to systemic collapse, changed from one hierarchical patriotic institution into another. Shortly before the accident of the *Kursk*, Mitrofan was ordained a hieromonk and posted to the remote village of Varzuga, on the coast of the White Sea, tasked with reviving and organizing the Orthodox faith in the post-atheist village, ancient cradle of Christianity. At this time, Mitrofan also began to research topics related to the history of the region, publishing works on its medieval saints, like Trifon of Pechenga, Feodorit of Kola and Varlaam of Keret.

Vladyka Mitrofan wrote that life looked very different in the periphery, where Soviet years had all but annihilated religious traditions vis-à-vis in metropolises. In 2000, for instance, in Moscow, the ROC celebrated the canonization of a large number of victims of atheist purges, including the tsar family, as martyrs. The religious renaissance accompanied a triumphant state–church symphony, with President Putin and Patriarch Alexy II kissing each other. In contrast to this pomp and optimism, those outside

the upper echelons of society languished under systemic anomy and the loss of moral values as a result of drastic systemic collapse, which had opened up national markets to swindlers, astrologers and strong men's tyranny. Aleksey Zvyagintsev's film *Leviathan* (2014), shot in the Murmansk diocese, on the coast of Teriberka, is key to understanding the material and spiritual agony of local inhabitants. Another film, *72 Meters*, by Vladimir Hotinenko (2004), also alludes to the catastrophe of the *Kursk* and the humiliation of the periphery.

The backdrop of agony, leading to anomy, is salient also in Mitrofan's album. He starts with a quote from 'The Girl Sang in a Church Choir', a poem by Alexander Blok, the Silver Age poet, that ends with the following lines: 'And sweet was her voice and the sun beams around / And only, by Holy Gates / high on the vault, / The child, versed into mysteries, mourned / because none of them will be ever returned.'[2] The quote is chosen not only for its content but also its symbolic date, 12 August (1905), coinciding with the *Kursk* disaster. In Orthodox Church tradition, the coincidence of commemorative calendar dates conveys symbolic, multilayered messages. Here, too, it provides a symbolic key to a taboo memory. As Mitrofan indicates, the sinking of the *Kursk* was a sign by God, warning of the looming apocalypse. People's reaction to this tragedy, he continues, was also incomparable with any other such tragedy, even if there had been quite many of them. Even 10 years later, people were still praying and commemorating the sailors by name. Mitrofan (2010, p. 5) explains the mystery – as he sees it – that it 'cannot be rationally explained otherwise, only by an everlasting spiritual need, a command of the heart and an order by God'. Mitrofan also refers to the many prophetic omens of the time, like that by Vanga, a popular soothsayer, who foretold that 'the Kursk would sink and all will die' (ibid., p. 7).

Stalinist bloodshed seen as blood sacrifice

The most important words Vladyka Mitrofan heard were by academician Dmitri Likhachev, the revered intellectual and former convict of the Solovetsk Gulag, who shortly before his death said:

> I am deeply convinced that the revival of Russia will begin from the North. … The whole North is soaked with blood. So many martyrs –it cannot fail to bear fruit. A renaissance can only happen in blood: 'there is no forgiveness without bloodshed.' That is the Law. (Mitrofan, 2010, p. 9)

I interpret Likhachev's above words as an attempt to discover the deeper meaning of the systemic collapse, by way of combining his own witnessing of martyrdom with traditional lines of Russian Orthodox religious thought. Likhachev was known as a courageous civil activist, who noted publicly that the oppressors still went unpunished. In this context, it is clear that by 'martyrs' Likhachev did not mean here only pious Christian individuals but rather a larger, heterogeneous category of people who, because of arbitrary accusations, ended up as fodder for the Stalinist meat grinder. The category of martyrs is vague for many reasons – who has the right to define the term, for instance, or conduct research on it, accessing the state's secret archives? The inability to define Soviet martyrdom in unambiguous terms reveals the painful problem of memory politics. On the same theme, 'the whole North' denotes the Archipelago Gulag, where, between 1929 and 1953, 18 million people suffered, 2–3 million of whom disappeared entirely. Even if Russians as a whole are aware of the experience of survivors of the Great Terror, there is no public consensus on how to manage this collective trauma. The NKVD archives were open to public access for only approximately 10 years, until 2003. Since then, along with the growing authority of the Federal Security Service, archive research and civil debate on memory politics have been under strict control, whereby the church has been commissioned to commemorate the victims of the Great Terror as martyrs but not to blame the authorities.

In light of these post-2003 developments, Likhachev's quote on the link between bloodshed and forgiveness deserves further elaboration. In the Bible, it is written that 'almost all things are by the law purged with blood' (Hebr. 9:22). Did Likhachev mean that the Mosaic practice of redeeming sins through blood martyrs would be acceptable today? Was he hinting that this should be the practice to follow, prompting Mitrofan (and subsequently the

reader) to consider whether it would be acceptable to justify loss of life on duty by glorifying the victims as martyrs? Is the promotion of such a martyrdom cult an attempt to undermine appeals for reconciliation projects, comparable to Holocaust-related projects of truth and reconciliation? Why did Likhachev not mention the New Testament's promise of Jesus' complete sacrifice? In the modern Russian-language Tolkovaâ Bibliâ, in the notes to Hebrews 9:22[3] an interpretation by Church Father John Chrysostom on Evangelist Matthew is provided (Chrysostom, In: Migne ser. graec. t. 57–58.): 'Nearly everything? Why this restriction? Because there was no perfect forgiveness of sins, but a semi-perfect [*polusoveršennoe*] and even much less, but here we have it. … He says, This is my blood of the [Covenant], which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28, NRSV).

I would assume that Likhachev's last greetings to Russian church hierarchs indeed point to the unresolved problem of memory politics in a state with a totalitarian past. There are no attempts made towards reconciliation by the powerholders and even less towards the preaching of the universal promise of redemption in the New Covenant. Rather, sticking with the Old Testament blood sacrifice concept converges with the concept of the holy war among Muslim fundamentalists, naming those outside *ummah* as adversaries. Take another example. The contemporary, populist Russian Orthodox author Vladimir Zobern (2014, p. 178) wrote that, when talking about 'monster Germans', one should not speak also of Christ's Commandment, since 'they are not only our, but God's enemies'. Zobern's demonization of post-Auschwitz Germans reasserts the categorization as holy war that the Second World War still holds onto. Carleton (2017, pp. 108–109) correctly notes, in his analysis of the film *The Great Patriotic War*, that Russians may take initiatives like the '2008 EU edict against Stalinism and Nazism' as 'an attempt to form a new pan-European identity' at the expense of their own national identity. That is, many Russians consider the blood sacrifices by Russians/Soviets related to the Second World War to exceed all of its Western allies' sacrifices; therefore, any, especially 'pan-European', attempt to relativize this sacrifice is met with national outrage. Meanwhile, for the

mainstream ROC hierarchs, it has become all the more convenient to interpret the Second World War as God-sent punishment for Russians for their abandonment of their fathers' faith (Bogumil and Voronina, 2020).

Apologetics for laying down one's life for one's friends

The album's next section, 'Sea', relates old proverbs on the need to be constantly vigilant of the dangers of the sea. 'It is scary for a man on the sea, for he is standing before the sea, as before the Lord Himself', Mitrofan (2010, p. 21) writes, for 'greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15:13), a quote frequently engraved as an epitaph on the graves of fallen soldiers in Russia. Dying in action the author equates with inheriting the Heavenly Kingdom: 'the Kursk went into oblivion for us to return from oblivion', Mitrofan writes, and praises the tsar-time spiritual traditions revered in the navy, implicitly suggesting that negligence of such traditions prove fatal. He then repeats the biblical quote 'and almost all things are by the law purged with blood' (Hebr. 9:22). Now the New Testament is also present, as Mitrofan equates the loss of one's relatives with Jesus' loss, when Lazarus died and Jesus wept (John 11:35): 'therefore our vast land wept also, suddenly having recognized itself as one united nation, having that moment become one family', Mitrofan writes, adding that the added cohesiveness of Russian society was one positive consequence of the disaster (Mitrofan, 2010, pp. 27, 61).

The section 'There is no death …' is on the eternal nature of the soul. It includes a list of the names of all 118 deceased submariners, a photo collage with funeral prayers, and both official and private gestures of mourning. The subsequent section, 'Forever', then focuses on individual stories of some of the victims. Captain Vladimir Bagriantsev's widow commemorates his life and his turning to Christ, alongside a photo of his baptismal cross, warped by the explosion. This section includes an intriguing description about the official commemoration of the 118 seamen, which started with the erection of a church in Vidyaevo, at the patriarch and president's order. The diocese commissioned

icons with portraits of the sailors in the frames of a two-sided commemorative icon, 'Our Lady of Kursk'. This project was not without controversy, however, as some people thought it would be about canonizing the sailors as saints. Alas, that was not the idea; in Orthodox iconography, it is possible to include uncanonized persons' stylized portraits in the picture's frames, or *kleima*. In this case, an icon-painter and another artist painted the sailors dressed in white robes. The initiative of this painting goes back to Hegumen Daniil of Pechenga monastery, who, in his dream, saw one of the submariners in white robes, sopping 'as if from the font'. Daniil interpreted his dream as a message from God to confirm Bishop Simon's (Pravoslavnyj portal, 2018) observation about the men: 'They were baptized in the sea water of their martyrdom.' In the central part of the four icons are the portraits of Our Lady of the Sign and Christ Almighty, as well as of Nicholas Wonderworker and Prince Vladimir. Why those two saints? Traditionally, Saint Nicholas is the protector of sailors and travellers, whereas Saint Vladimir epitomizes the righteous prince, baptizer of the Fatherland and visionary ruler, in service of whom the sacrifices were made (ibid.). Naturally, the common first name alludes also to the symbolic tie between the medieval Prince Vladimir of Kiev and present-day President Vladimir, whose heavenly protector Vladimir of Kiev is.

In the section 'Iconoclasm', the author defends the decision to depict the seamen in *kleima*. Many had opposed their iconization, arguing that several of the seamen were not even baptized Christians. 'One could paint them based on love only, not based on truth', however, Mitrofan (2010, p. 69) argues, admitting the inadequacy of theological apologetics. In the final pages of the book, a list of all 118 first names are given again, now in the *sinodik*, or list of prayer. The last names in the list denote their non-Christian background (among them Ruslan, Rashid, Abdulkadyr, Fanis, Nail, Rishat, Solovat, Murat, Mamed) without commentary. The church obviously wished to commemorate the crew as a seamless unity, as equal martyrs killed on duty, accomplishing this through iconography and prayers but leaving ambiguous how martyrdom related to dying on duty in times of peace. It is worth noting,

however, that the relative share of Muslim soldiers is increasing in the Russian army and navy, and that it is vital not to discriminate against them. Furthermore, the high value of a martyr's death is one of the uniting components between Orthodox Christian and Islamic thought.

In sum, Mitrofan interprets the coinciding events in a mystifying way: 'when, after ploughing the seabed, the underwater missile cruiser laid a bloody boundary, marking the limit of the spiritual degradation of the Russian people, after this … in Moscow it marked a line under the Russian history of the 20th century'. The author thus draws a chronological and substantial connection between the tragedy and the biggest ever canonization ceremony of new martyrs. 'The Church, on the part of the whole nation, glorified those who, with their martyr's death stood in the way of the godless authorities and asked for all of us the forgiveness of sin for deviating from the faith of their fathers.' (Mitrofan, 2010, p. 69).

Lewdness and promiscuity: the enemy within

The author continues his apocalyptical apologetics of the tragedy in the section 'Boundary': 'the country, who used to call herself Holy Rus', turned to ridicule and fornication', he writes, and quoting Ezekiel 23:29–31:

> They will deal with you in hatred and take away everything you have worked for. They will leave you stark naked, and the shame of your prostitution will be exposed. Your lewdness and promiscuity have brought this on you, because you lusted after the nations and defiled yourself with their idols. (Mitrofan, 2010, p. 73)

The quote from Ezekiel matches the sociological notion of anomy. Having recovered the corpses in 2001, the authorities decided to bury the majority of them in the St Petersburg cemetery Serafimovskoe, dedicated to those killed on duty. At the ceremony, the local priest did not hide his emotions, blaming the seamen's wives for the accident. The wives were guilty of not waiting for their husbands to come back from the sea, for not loving them enough

or sharing in their hardships. He spoke of the moral degradation of the modern man, the degradation of the relationship between husband and wife. Accompanying the elderly priest's homily, but on a more positive tone, Mitrofan quotes Konstantin Simonov's legendary wartime lyrics: 'Wait for me.' Each naval officer hopes that his wife would pray for him, Mitrofan writes, and, by so doing, save his life. He quotes the final verses by Simonov: 'How I survived, will know / Only you and me, / You just knew how to wait / Like no one else' (Mitrofan, 2010, p. 75). Not surprisingly, the popular songwriter Yuri Shevchuk's lyrics on the *Kursk* implicitly echo Simonov: 'I know … there is no salvation, but if you believe … wait, you will find my letter on your chest' (GL5.ru, 2019, p. 5).

As an attempt to characterize the strength of spiritual life – no matter what form it takes, as the popular lyrics testify – as well as the need to point out whom to blame, and where modern man's alleged degradation stems from, these examples are striking. Blame the wives! – for not loving, not praying. Mitrofan (2010, pp. 75–77) suggests that God's punishment in the form of bloodshed results from the collective sins that results from modern man's own degradation, unrelated to any external threat. Mitrofan does not blame Westerners; on the contrary, he includes the prayers sent to Vidayaevo as a sign of consolation and solidarity by the wives of British submariners of the Royal Navy. The hand-stitched poem–prayer tapestry consists of exactly 118 English words, commemorating each soul lost in the tragedy. Mitrofan's commentary here is emotional: 'What an important example for our families!' The prayer is sincere, of universal Christian-religious content, with the refrain 'O hear us when we cry to Thee / for those in peril on the sea!' (ibid.).

The leadership's role and asking for forgiveness

The apologetics of the catastrophe develop further in the description of the official aftermath, including the decisive role of Admiral Popov of the NF, who, against the wishes of his superiors, considered accepting aid from his counterpart in the NATO forces.

Mitrofan emphasizes that no person involved in the *Kursk* accident remained as he had been before the accident. Popov, too, 'let all suffering go to his heart, resigned from his post', and 'the Lord took pity on him and allowed him to live on'. Focusing on only Popov's role in the accident and his agony over six pages, Mitrofan avoids blaming the leadership in charge. Likewise, there are no comments on the reasons for Popov's resignation. The section 'Commander' cites the admiral's speech before the submariners' families, ending with the words:

> Nowhere is there such equality before fate, as in the crew of a submarine, where all either are defeated or die. Grief has come, but life goes on. Raise your children, raise your sons. And forgive me. For not saving your men. (Mitrofan, 2010, p. 93)

Asking humbly for forgiveness is all but impossible for a Russian admiral, yet Popov does so, at the minute of resignation. According to Mitrofan, people sent their letters of support to Admiral Popov, while blaming the news agencies for spreading hate and filth. There were also other signs of sympathy, that is, local people supported the local navy administration. Importantly, on the monument dedicated to victims of peaceful times – especially to victims of the *Kursk* – which uses the salvaged hull of the sub in the harbour of Murmansk, there is attached an icon of Admiral Fedor Ušakov. This icon, as a local Murmansk dweller put it (Pravoslavie.Ru, 2006), represents the paragon of a righteous admiral 'who protected his own men'.

Concluding remarks on Mitrofan's apologetics: the challenge of diversity

The religious resurgence in Russia, which started in 1988 with the millennial celebration of the baptism of Rus' and ended with the institutionalization of church–state collaboration today, has resulted in a rich repertoire on retelling national history, as I have discussed above. Nevertheless, replacing the vacuum that

state atheism had left behind was not a smooth process. The state turned to the ROC to help define and disseminate the national agenda, whereas the church lacked resources and educated clergymen (Kirill, 2012). After 70 years of isolation, theological education lagged behind, and the church found itself in an uneasy, softly speaking, position. To blame the church for being antiquated or ineloquent would therefore be reductive. As the case of the *Kursk* demonstrates, the clergy's reaction in blaming the sailors' allegedly unfaithful wives instead of military leadership and, in more general terms, the apologetics of blood sacrifices implicitly continue the unquestioned practice of respecting the oath of allegiance and, ultimately, self-sacrifice. This has been the common practice of the country, which, according to Stalinist standards, was order Nr. 270, or 'not a step back'. Furthermore, the use of explicit religious rhetoric in a modern state military one may interpret as a kind of strategics-level theocratization, as Dima Adamsky (2019, p. 244) suggests in his comparative analysis of a model of 'Military Theocratization' in various countries.

I would suggest that, according to the *Everlasting Lamp*'s political-theological apologetics, the quote '[In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and] without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness' (Hebr. 9:22, NIV) indeed serves as an explicit illustration of 'military theocratization'. In Mitrofan's apologetics, however, it is much less about strategics-level thinking and more about giving voice to the local community's attempts to cope with and make sense of the tragedy, like referring to bad omens: 'when the sub was baptized, the champagne bottle was broken not by the right person'. Mitrofan reminds the reader here of the old tsar-time tradition of baptizing a naval ship. It consisted of a prayer service, including the rite of blessing the water and then sprinkling this water on the naval jack. As part of the ceremony, the ship received its own guardian icon. On the annual name day of that guardian saint, a liturgy would be held, and 'every single member of the crew from captain to the last cabin boy would take part in Holy Communion', Mitrofan (2010, pp. 88–89) writes. He hints, again, here that the national catastrophe was the result of Russia's rejection of their

fathers' faith and tradition. Respectively, commemoration of the new martyrs highlights their blood sacrifice as a gesture of collective atonement.

To conclude, some words on the problem of reviving old tsar-time traditions in the NF. First, even if Mitrofan does not mention it, the ship was indeed baptized in March 1995 in the docks of Vidayavo. Every sailor received as a gift a small icon of St Nicholas, and the priest sprinkled holy water on the naval jack, with the ceremony culminating in the priest's handing over to the fleet command a copy of the 12th-century icon of Our Lady of Kursk. The tradition was respected; a *moleben* (prayer service) was delivered. Even if the clergy had serviced the divine liturgy, not all the seamen would have taken part in the Holy Communion, as not many of them were Orthodox Christians, let alone were churchened [*otserkovleny*]. This situation seems to be related with the repeated demand for blood sacrifice in the Old Covenant to the singular sacrifice in the New Covenant – that is, Jesus' promise of the perfect forgiveness of sins through the Eucharist. I argue that, when speaking about the resurgence of church–military collaboration in today's Russia, this is one of the most prominent unresolved question: in a multi-confessional community, not every member can participate in one Holy Communion service; there must be arrangements for diversity (Ortodoksiviesti, 2019). In wider societal terms, when the Russian state leadership is not willing to undergo a redemptive process and apologize, does it prevent the ROC as well? Is it that church–state collaboration has bound the church to the Mosaic Law, thus admitting it is not living up to spiritual standards but of standards of the flesh?

Is this question worth exploring? My thesis is that the failure to deliver a theology concerning the new martyrs indeed underlies a fundamental problem in church–state collaboration in Russia. As the example above indicates, demanding blood sacrifices reflects the multifaith situation, but does not help to resolve the problem of a totalitarian legacy. One might also ask, who may be included in the category of new Soviet-era martyrs – Orthodox believers, other believers like Muslims, and atheists – since all of them have fulfilled their duty in service of the Motherland? What

the commemoration of the multifaith and atheist victims of the *Kursk* testifies is that being faithful to the national cause until death is respected above all, in war and peace, and civil religion is what counts, whereas one's private religion does not.

The Drama Film *Kursk*

Western value of 'unity in plurality' vs. Russian rejection of foreign aid

At the Toronto film festival in fall 2018, an interviewer asked Danish director Thomas Vinterberg what his biggest challenge was in making the film *Kursk*. He replied:

> Knowing that we had to make an English-language film that takes place in Russia was a big challenge; it was the biggest challenge on the movie, in fact, and a challenge that at one point made me consider whether to make the film or not. So I decided to consider it a specific challenge in that I would have to make it as truthful as possible, and then it became a question of accents as well. So I thought if I mix very British accents or American accents with Matthias Schoenaerts' Central European accent, it's going to be too complicated, so I went for Central European, which then tends to be a little bit German and a little bit Danish here and there. I made that decision to try to control this impossible thing with 108 speaking parts and with actors from different countries. (Cineuropa, 2018)

Vinterberg's notion of revealing artistic truths by mixing 'Central European' accents is thrilling. The use of a lingua franca conveys an illusion of the universality of the crew and adds to the artistic estrangement. As the focus of the drama film is bravery and sacrifice under extreme circumstances, much depends on the viewer's reception of its authenticity. In the same vein, clunky dialogue, or stereotypical patterns of behaviour, underscore the dissociation from the normal and the everyday, intensifying the apocalyptic presentiment of looming death.

An international film production based on a true, traumatizing story taking place in contemporary Russia is necessarily an external intervention into the sphere of national and military sensitivities. Unsurprisingly, in the post-2014 situation, the Russian administration forbade shooting the film within the Russian Federation. Finally, after suspending negotiations, Toulon, France, replaced Vidyaevo of the Kola Peninsula. Financed by European Union (EU) member states (France, Belgium, Luxemburg), with a budget of $40 million, the cultural production incarnates a vision of pan-European identity, including the value of 'unity in plurality'. Vinterberg's production glorifies these identities, focusing on brotherhood of crewmanship in a catastrophe.

The film's point of departure is national disaster, but the threat in question (i.e. nuclear explosion), or a 'second Chernobyl', as one of the sailors in the film notes, is one of global significance, implying that neither the Russian government nor Russians as a nation have a monopoly over the film's topic. In fact, the film *Kursk* deals with the challenge of managing mutual dependence, requiring the ability for and willingness of national powers to collaborate effectively. As the plot indicates, only the starting point is a national problem. The film depicts the survivors of a society at the 'end of history' (F. Fukuyama), the victory of capitalism over the outdated state socialism, and explores a situation where the state Leviathan threw her citizens into the abyss of financial and moral bankruptcy, into anomy – as discussed earlier. Russian military capabilities also weakened substantially. As many may remember from the 1990s, Greenpeace anti-nuclear activists, the Norwegian Bellona group and the world media even disseminated pictures of rusting radioactive Soviet-era military trash from the NF.

The film's opening scene hints at this depressing starting point and the anticipation of yet another, larger catastrophe at hand. Since the true story is well known, the viewer is expected to contemplate why the crew of the *Kursk* had to die in a time not of war but of peace. Why did the military administration refuse to accept foreign rescue aid, a common practice at sea? Who was responsible for the decisions made surrounding the disaster?

Collective bravery and sacrifice: Kolesnikov

I will next explore Vinterberg's depiction of the bravery and sacrifice expected of the seamen of the *Kursk*. In the main role of the film is Captain Lieutenant Kalekov, whose prototype is Captain Lieutenant Dmitri Kolesnikov, who takes charge of the 23 survivors in the 9th Compartment after the explosion. The name Kalekov hints at the meaning of 'cripple', stemming from the word *kaleka*. Kolesnikov, in contrast, stems from *koleso*, or wheel. The hint may ring a bell to a Russian-speaking audience. The original Kolesnikov may also ring a bell thanks to the famous 'letter by Captain Kolesnikov', found on the corpse in the submarine, posthumously turning him into a national martyr-hero (Wikipedia, 2019a). Kolesnikov's handwritten note testifies to the fact that, after the explosion of the training torpedo, not all of the men instantly perished. They suffered loss of oxygen, struggled for their life and awaited rescue. The note of the 27-year-old captain lieutenant consisted of two parts. One is a love letter to his wife and the other a note to the rest of the world, with the words 'I hope someone will read this'. Kolesnikov's last wish gave birth to a widespread movement. First, it authorized the family members of the seamen and the media to blame the administration for negligence of their duties; second, the tragedy was captured in popular imagination through singer-songwriter Iuri Shevchuk's and the rock band DDT's song 'Captain Kolesnikov'. Shevchuk's lyrics reveal the abyss of tragedy and the disconnect between the political and the intimate. The latter culminates in the song: 'About death, who will tell us a few honest words, / Too bad there's no black boxes for sunken sailors. … After what happened, for a long time they will lie, / Will the Commission tell you how hard it is to die?' (Karaoke.ru, 2019; YouTube, 2009).

As the film script is based on Robert Moore's book *A Time to Die* (2002), its name alone reveals the focus: what it means to die on duty. When the film *Kursk* was released to the public, one could immediately anticipate the bitter sentiment it would trigger in millions of Russians. Any such explicit attempt to propagate the superiority of Western universal values would necessarily have been

received negatively by a Russian audience. In my understanding, *Kursk* succeeds in anticipating this reaction by focusing its praise on the unison, brotherhood and bravery of the crew and the hope that remains for the next generation.

The unison of the crew surfaces early as a leitmotif in the first scenes of the film. Kalekov, the main protagonist, pawns his valuable watch to be able to pay for the beverages at his friend's wedding party. Sacrifice for the sake of one's best friend is the chief symbol of male bonding. 'I know you would do the same for me', Kalekov reassures the bridegroom. The gesture becomes even more poignant when the visual landscapes hint that wages had been unpaid for some time. Collective sacrifice was needed not only to celebrate a wedding but in everyday life, too.

To give away one's watch is a significant symbol in itself. A watch may have been a man's most valuable item, something one gave at one's deathbed or when departing for the battlefront. The symbol of the watch even appears with this latter meaning in a concluding scene in the last minutes of the film. The beverages seller appears again and returns Kalekov's watch to the orphaned son, praising the little boy for his bravery. In the film, the boy refuses to shake hands with the admiral, who, in the eyes of the victims' families, is responsible for the deaths of the seamen. In my reading, the scene epitomizes the legacy passed on to the next generation. Even if the last text of the film is '71 children were orphaned by the catastrophe', in Vinterberg's vision, the little boy's gesture of civic activism seems to emphasize the hope for change to come.

Why must we die?

In an interview, Vinterberg mentions not just the bravery of the crew as his starting point but also the universal question of meaning in death:

> The bravery of these men really struck me. We are all eventually going to run out of time, which is something that bothers me a great deal. My wife, who is an actress in the movie, has just become a priest, and I keep asking her this question, 'Why are

> we going to die?' People don't talk about death any more; they talk about youth and trying to optimise their lives. A few generations ago, we talked about death because people died earlier and dying was part of life. It's not anymore; it's become something we fear, and also it's become something that only literature and films deal with. I felt that this was the ultimate story about running out of time and how you behave when you're in that situation—that moved me, interested me, fascinated me and scared me. This heartbeat—this very civilised, orderly cry for help—it really got me. (Cineuropa, 2018)

The topic of 'running out of time' is a universal theme in the arts. Although the tragedy was a result of mismanagement and negligence of both ecological threats and human lives, its counterweight is the hope that the children of the deceased seamen represent. Even so, Vinterberg's film depicts a tradition that prefers the celebration of martyrs instead of the rescue of the living.

Critics' reactions remained reserved. Elena Lazic expressed her disapproval of the director's decision to omit the explicit naming of political decision-making, that Vladimir Putin is conspicuously absent from the film (Little White Lies, 2018). As for me, I think it is artistically more powerful to point to the bear not by name but by metonymy. The strong arm of the state is revealed in a rapid scene in which the security staff tame a furious woman in the midst of public crowd by injecting her with a sedative. The scene is based on true events, recorded on video, when the president was meeting the family members in Vidyaevo, as I mentioned earlier, with the clip ending up circulating on the internet (YouTube, 2012, 2019). Even today, anyone interested in the story of the once-glorious NF's humiliation revealed to the eyes of the world in the sinking of the *Kursk* will find no shortage of material on the Russian-language internet. In the film dialogue, ironically, the sailors mention that even life-saving equipment was sold to the Americans: 'Now the equipment is located next to the *Titanic*, and serves the tourists.' Furthermore, the film focuses on the collective agony of the whole community of Vidyaevo. They get no official information, only rumours. The crying women meet

a stone-faced admiral with his retinue, who repeats: 'the men have given their oath to sacrifice their life in service of defending their homeland'. There is fundamentally more at stake here than the president's evident white lies.

The film *Kursk* elaborates on the unflinchingly rigid hierarchical order of military command. This is repeated over several episodes: first, when the crew try, but fail, to receive permission to eject a damaged training torpedo to escape a pending disaster, and, second, when the authorities reject timely foreign aid. The respected Admiral Popov, who unofficially contacts his old counterpart in the NATO forces, is subsequently dismissed.

The release of the film in Russia was delayed by six months; the premiere took place only on 27 June 2019 (Wikipedia, 2019b). Before that, viewers could watch pirated copies, and Russian critics saw *Kursk* at the Toronto film festival. Andrei Sharogradski (Radio Svoboda, 2018) anticipated that the Russian viewer would not be offended but rather disappointed by the superficiality of the outcome – that is, how detached the film actors were from the tragedy itself. As he puts it, the Russian band DDT, mentioned earlier in this paper, succeeded much better in their depiction of the tragedy (ibid.). Sharogradski's reaction reflects national sentiment: suspicion of foreigners sticking their noses in the affairs of others. In the same vein, another Russian critic, Tatiana Šorohova giving no credit to the cinematography of the film, checks the film against Russian realities, finding it fake:

> We at the unconscious level analyze the slightest deviations of the image from the person and, as it were, repel a fake. … 'Kursk' is a rare manifestation of the effect of the 'uncanny valley' in the movie. In it, everything seems similar and recognizable, but that is not how it is. … Probably, if domestic cinematographers took up a film about the tragedy in New York in September 2001, the result could be compared with Kursk. (KinoPoisk, 2018)

For scholars of cultural productions, interested in cultural warfare and images of the enemy, *Kursk* offers serious material. The film explores the blurry boundary between a domestic and a global

realm, as well as the deep entrenchment and sophisticated dilemmas of duty and conscience.

Global interdependence vs. diversity of mentalities

Vinterberg's film succeeds in revealing global interdependence, and in touching on universal questions like dying on duty. He also points to the legacy that catastrophes leave for orphaned children and families, who, unlike the soldiers, have not sworn an oath of allegiance. The children of *Kursk* are young adults, collectively shaped by this tragedy, as the children of 9/11. As Shevchuk's lyrics point out, 'Which of us are the same age, who is the hero, who is the schmuck, / Captain Kolesnikov's letter touches us' (Lyricstranslate.com, 2019). Second, *Kursk* explores not only death on duty but death in general. The director is right here: in the West, death is no longer a common topic of discussion – not so in Russia, where the average life expectancy of men dramatically decreased throughout the 1990s, nearing that in Nigeria.

The global level of significance and the sober tone are achieved, in the first place, through artistic estrangement. In real life, the living conditions of the NF families were even much worse, but the point is of course not there. When Sergei Dorenko, the Russian TV reporter, interviewed naval officers of Vidyaevo shortly after the disaster about the unheated flats and unpaid salaries, one of the respondents shrugged his shoulders and replied nonchalantly: 'I do not really know, perhaps we are accustomed, we are Russians, though. … Even if it is cold, there is the warmth of home and of our wives and children. … We would still go out to the sea—the sea will show everything. … The Americans will find it hard to fight us' (Meduza, 2019; YouTube, 2019).

Concluding Remarks

In this comparative reading, I contrasted two cultural products – a photo album by an 'insider' versus a film by an 'outsider' – investigating what implicit answers they provide to the

apologetical question of the *Kursk* disaster: why did the seamen have to die? Both works elaborate not only on secular, historical and national but also on theological, cyclical and global aspects of and underlying the question. Hegumen Mitrofan accentuates the origins of the national process of church–state collaboration in the context of the social anomy of the 1990s. He, like many contemporary Russian theologians, attempts to cope with the collective trauma by referring to Old Covenant theology on blood sacrifices, traditional in the pre-revolutionary context of church–state symphony, but ends up admitting its inadequacy. One would assume that the theology of blood sacrifices would compensate for the lack of secular mechanisms for coping with the totalitarian past, as well as rhetorically apologize for the ongoing practice of framing soldiers and sailors killed in action as martyrs of holy war, defenders of the Eastern Christian faith (like during the operation in Syria). In this frame, recognizing the significance of Christ's singular sacrifice is impossible.

Vinterberg's film, in contrast, creates an illusion of unity among the crew, of individual bravery in unison, to the point of sacrificing one's life. There is no verbal religious rhetoric; however, baptismal crosses can be seen on the sailors' bare chests, and people gathering in church for the blessing of their matrimony and for the commemoration of their deceased serve as strong symbols. In so doing, the film celebrates the universal Christian heritage and tradition; it represents the universal promise of the New Covenant.

As to contrasts between the two cultural productions, Hegumen Mitrofan avoids all criticism of leadership, while Vinterberg addresses its negligence and mismanagement. The gesture of the little orphan, played by a Russian actor (all other actors are non-Russians), of not shaking hands with the 'bad' admiral who rejected foreign aid represents the power of civil opposition. The non-Russian auteur thus points to responsibility of the leadership, while the Russian blames the people for rejecting their fathers' religion, and the wives for their unfaithfulness.

Both artistic visions – one delivered by a European with a $40 million budget and a pan-European cast, the other one by a

Russian insider – have much in common in their imagery of bravery and sacrifice. The film offers a global viewpoint, which I called here 'unity in plurality', and targets a global audience. The Russian vision, in contrast, targets primarily a domestic audience and tries to make sense of the lost lives by canonizing and iconizing them in memory. Seamen dying on duty represent blood sacrifice as an ultimate, but inaccessible, form of deification, an imitatio Christi (*obo*ženie). An analogy can be drawn to trauma theory, which suggests that trauma occurs when transcendence becomes impossible. Captain Kolesnikov's question – will anyone (after my death) read this? – illustrates the same deadlock.

My suggestion is that, when the imitation of the outdated model of church–state symphony is unable to meet the realities of mutual dependencies in a multi-confessional environment, powerful artistic contributions can compensate, to some extent, for its deficiencies. There is promise provided by 'unity in plurality' viewpoints, including transnational production teams meeting the reality of multi-ethnic and multi-confessional mutual dependencies. Access to a global audience may also prove helpful; literature takes trauma on board, and so does cinema too. The new generation of Russian theologians may find practical ways to commemorate Orthodox as well as non-Orthodox victims as martyrs, but they cannot compensate for the secular leadership's reluctance to deal with the management of the past. For the time being, therefore, seamen will continue dying and blood sacrifices will be offered.

Notes

[1] In particular, TV reporter Sergei Dorenko, backed by oligarch money, made history with his reports (see RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2019).

[2] Here I refer to the translation by Yevgeny Bonver (2001).

[3] Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Hebr. 9:22, NRSV). In Russian: Da i vse počti po zakonu očiŝaetsâ krov'û, i bez prolitiâ krovi ne byvaet proŝeniâ (Lopuhin, 2019).

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